SWEET AND LOW

Designers James Strickland and Suzanne Rester Watson imbue a brand-new carriage house in Georgia’s Low Country with all the rustic charm of a generations-old barn

WRITER: CHRISTINE PITTEL  PHOTOGRAPHER: J. SAVAGE GIBSON  PRODUCER: BRICE GAILLARD
This page: Rolling barn doors separate sleeping and living areas. The rope chandelier with old mercury glass shades was custom-made by Eloise Pickard and hangs over a vintage French table from Lucullus. Opposite: Made of pine board and batten with a lantern-topped cedar shake roof, the guesthouse was modeled after a barn. The gable with the big window would have been the hayloft.
IN GEORGIA’S LOW COUNTRY, where trees and houses tend to date back at least a hundred years, the pull of tradition is powerful. Even newcomers like Chris Lawson, who grew up in Michigan and meandered down South, quickly develop an appreciation for the rich history and poignant beauty of this place. A simple walk with his dogs takes Lawson under the overarching branches of a majestic allée of live oaks that were planted before the Revolutionary War. Egrets and osprey nest in the marshes that fringe his property. “I used to mark the seasons by the changing leaves, but here it’s the marsh grass that changes color, from vibrant green in spring to mellow gold in autumn,” says Lawson. He was one of the first to pick out a lot in the Ford Plantation—a private 1,800-acre enclave on the banks of the Ogeechee River (about 20 miles south of Savannah), where Henry and Clara Ford used to spend their winters. The Georgian-style mansion they built in the 1920s as a sporting retreat is now the clubhouse for the community.

Above: In the sitting area, a sofa covered in Great Plains wool from Holly Hunt faces a William Morris-style chair from Amy Parish Antiques and a fanciful bamboo chair from Jerry Pair. Stereo equipment and a TV are concealed behind the louvered doors. Walls and cabinetry were painted with Benjamin Moore’s historic colors, and then rubbed with a superfine steel wool pad to bring out the grain of the wood.
When Lawson and his wife, Ellen Berger, were ready to construct their own house, they were determined to respect the land and the local customs. They hired James Strickland of Historical Concepts, a Georgia firm that specializes in historically accurate modern-day versions of traditional buildings. Instead of the typical big suburban house and attached garage, Strickland designed a gracious compound, meant to look as if the buildings had been added one by one, over generations. The couple decided to build the carriage house (which would function as a guesthouse) first and live there while plans for the main house were completed.

Strickland imagined the carriage house as a working barn that had evolved over time: Gradually, horse stalls had given way to cars and the tack room became a mudroom. Upstairs, the former hayloft had been converted into living quarters. To make this story ring true, the contractor had to create a poetic patina from the start and that's where Florida-based interior designer Suzanne Rester Watson, of Inside, was crucial to the collaboration. She found the reclaimed brick, the
This page: A window seat is covered in Rogers & Goffigon linen with a paisley from Old World Weavers on the pillow. Herringbone wool throw from Brahms Mount Textiles. Monoprint by Robert Wolf. Opposite: Watson designed the simple wrought-iron canopy bed, with a coverlet made from Rogers & Goffigon linen. The handblocked pillow fabric is by Robert Kime, through John Rosselli.
“The quiet earth tones reflect the unspoiled natural setting”
weathered barn wood, and the old oak floorboards (salvaged from a post office in Pennsylvania).

The upstairs living quarters may measure a mere 890 square feet, but the floor plan was conceived to maximize every bit of space, with window seats and storage cabinets, for example, under the slope of the ceiling. There's even a wine cellar, four feet wide and six feet deep, tucked underneath the stairs. "The house lives big, but it's really very small," says Strickland.

Watson managed to turn the tightness to her advantage, paring down the furnishings to achieve a rugged simplicity. Each piece was evaluated for proportion and shape before it was allowed into what is basically one big room. Fabrics are natural linens and soft wools. "The quiet earth tones reflect the unspoiled natural setting," says Watson. Every detail was considered, down to the antique locks on the window frames. All the light fixtures are vintage pieces that have been rewired. "The old-fashioned mercury glass shades, the fragrant cypress wood, the Oriental rugs—all these are in keeping with the handcrafted character of the space," says Watson. "What we tried to do was go back to the Low Country essentials."